

Churchill on the Prairie: The Short, Sweet Life of Winston Churchill College, Pontiac, Illinois

May 7, 2013

FINEST HOUR 146, SPRING 2010

BY PHILIP AND SUSAN LARSON

Mr. & Mrs. Larson head the Churchill Centre Chicagoland chapter and chaired the 2006 International Churchill Conference. They wish to thank former U.S. Representative Tom Ewing, a prime mover in the founding and naming of Winston Churchill College in 1966 and a tireless provider of contacts and interviews for this article.

=====

“Fire sirens, factory whistles and church bells would sound to kick off the Pontiac Chamber of Commerce business fund drive for Winston Churchill College.” Sounding your car horn was also recommended. The name Winston Churchill had found a home on the broad prairies he had admired during his American visits: central Illinois’ agrarian Livingston County, population only 10,000. In 1966, its citizens founded the only college ever named for Churchill in the United States. This unlikely event makes an inspiring story.^[1]

RURAL ENTERPRISE

Not content with the good life in a flourishing area, community leaders perceived an education gap. Although several schools were located in the general proximity, too many students, they believed, were falling between the cracks or needed a second chance. Either there was not room in existing colleges, or their potential was diminished. The solution was to found a private co-ed junior college which would more fully nurture the individual and maximize his life potential.

Once the decision was made to found a college, the community closed ranks to make it happen in the only way they knew: independent action without government aid. The project was an example of the can-do independence and spirit of rural America. As Oscar Brissenden, retired executive with the state Farm Bureau and a college founder stated, “We talked about walking under our own power, owning our

own soul, paying our own way....”^[2] During the campaign for donations he liked to say: “Don’t give until it hurts, give until it feels good.”

The Winston Churchill College (WCC) project blended leaders with a mix of fine talent in education, business and the professions. Betty Lower was a Fulbright Scholar who with her husband William taught at Pontiac High School. Other principals included Mrs. Ray Westall; Mrs. Lucile Goodrich; administrators and educators of the Max Myers School; local businessmen Frank Leyman and Duane Haas; bank president Myron Heins; dentist Russell Morris; Illinois State University President Robert Bone; and three lawyers: August Fellheimer, Sam Smith and Tom Ewing, now a retired Congressman.

As the local paper stated, “the founding of the college with their own money and effort—in the ‘blood, toil, tears and sweat’ tradition—has brought Livingston Countians...into close harmony and cooperation.”^[3]

Why name the college for a far-off citizen of another country? Because Churchill was considered “the outstanding world statesman of our time.” Its founders hoped that “the college will perpetuate his philosophy of individual freedom and his ideals of courage and responsibility.”^[4]

It was Tom Ewing who suggested Churchill’s name, which was preferred over the first governor of the Northwest Territory. The athletic teams were appropriately christened the Bulldogs, to capture the tenacious spirit of the wartime Churchill.^[5]

PLAN AND EXECUTION

The idea of founding a college from scratch was especially daunting. Such a venture needed expertise and money to move off the dream stage into reality. It began in mid-1964 with Dr. Raymond Dooley, president of nearby Lincoln College, exploring the idea of a private junior college in the area. Local folk took charge, creating a board of regents, which generated wide community support. Questions needed to be answered such as fund raising, physical plant, administration, faculty, student enrollment and marketing. With Churchillian spirit, the citizens charged ahead.

The fund-raising campaign blossomed, raising \$150,000. Miraculously, fund-raisers Brissenden and Leyman kept the administration expenses to under one percent.^[6] About 1500 individuals or businesses contributed, no donation higher than \$6000. The “farmers gave 100 to 1000 bushels of corn or

soybeans.”^[7] Caught up in the spirit, local amateurs presented a play that netted \$700. It was a community effort: even local youngsters put on a play in a garage, raising \$7.26.^[8]

The college physical plant occupied a vacated 1894 high school. With substantial renovation, ample space was made ready for the opening on 25 September 1966. The community was a wonderful source for contributions of time and materials. The college president’s walnut desk was provided by a local editor and a special appeal brought in thousands of books. Tom Ewing put out a call for five matching chandeliers for the main entrance.^[9]

Recruiting for administration and faculty came mostly from the area. Dr. Andreas Paloumpis, an Illinois State University professor, was named Winston Churchill College’s first president. Three deans were added who doubled up to teach, along with ten other teachers. Now on the fast track, student enrollment started in February 1966 and grew to 184 at the opening. Particularly helpful was a June Articulation conference, allowing transfer of credits to four-year colleges.^[10]

Marketing was aided by the name of Winston Churchill, which strongly resonated with a public fully aware of the great man’s achievements, made even more intense by his recent passing. Word was spread with ads and brochures bearing such slogans as “One college concerned with one student at a time” and “Many a door is closed to thousands! But [not ours].”^[11]

As part of the marketing strategy, the college created a Churchill Room inside the main entrance: “the first institution with archives devoted exclusively to Churchill memorabilia” in the United States. Many key individuals were solicited for historic contributions. Clementine Churchill wrote, “I feel honoured that the city of Pontiac should wish to remember my husband...”^[12]

U.S. Representative Leslie Arends contacted former President Dwight Eisenhower, who contributed a moving 1951 Churchill signed letter: “My dear Ike...with all my heart, believe me your comrade and friend.”^[13] Senator Adlai Stevenson III donated the original speech his father gave at the Churchill memorial service in Washington, D.C. in 1965. Joyce Hall of Hallmark Cards sent a folio of Churchill prints. Philatelic contributions took on a special significance when Jennifer Toombs, the British artist who designed the British Commonwealth Churchill “omnibus” commemoratives, sent over some of her

original art.^[14] A magnificent Churchill bust by the sculptor Robert Merrell Gage was placed on a plinth inside the main entrance.

FIVE HAPPY YEARS

In just two years the Pontiac community had accomplished a major undertaking. The official dedication and installation of the first president started with an academic procession accompanied by the Pontiac High School band. A color guard led seventy-three official delegates from their respective schools, headed by Harvard as the oldest. British Consul-General Douglas Robey offered greetings.^[15]

A vital part of Winston Churchill College was the 500-member Guild, whose activities included fund-raising, clerical assistance, library support and student aid. Their 160-page WCC Cook Book began with a jubilant introduction "...someone dared to 'dream the impossible dream'...but the doubters didn't reckon on the people who make up Livingston County!" The shop the Guild created is still in business.

Extracurricular programs were ambitious and productive. The mixed chorus, under Betty Lower, grew to over a third of the college population. The Churchill College Players provided an exciting dramatic program directed by William Lower. Their ambitious schedule included productions of Mr. Roberts, Inherit the Wind, Brigadoon and Oklahoma.^[16] Sports focused on basketball and golf. The "Bulldog" basketball team finished 10-12 in the first year, but were 14-7 by the fourth.^[17]

END OF THE DREAM

Alas, Winston Churchill College wasn't destined to survive. As the yearbook noted in 1969: "The burgeoning state junior college system has caused considerable decline in all private college and university enrollments."^[18] Also, WCC accreditation was conditioned on certain advanced degrees being required after five years, which involved large additional expenses. And—crucially—no endowment had been built up.

Enrollment had risen to 255, but the final downward spiral saw attendance falling drastically and finances with it. With Churchillian spirit, the board tried to fight back, "contacting practically all the individuals of the county and surrounding area," but to little avail.^[19]

Oscar Brissenden recalled the sale of assets in 1971: The auctioneer was "wearing a straw hat and drawling like Johnny Cash. But it was like a funeral for me, and when they got to the forty-four choir

robes yesterday I couldn't take it any more and had to leave.”^[20] The Board settled the college's debts and the doors closed forever. No public funds were ever needed.

Sadly, the grand old 1894 building had outlived any useful purpose and needed significant structural repairs, and the local public schools were already operational. Pontiac's McCoy Construction purchased the building and land. The decision was made to auction whatever there was to sell of the building features: molding, bricks, light fixtures. Once the building was dismantled, it was razed. The dormitory building, purpose-built for Churchill College in the mid-1960s, was converted to apartments and survives today.

Despite the sudden end, there were defining moments to remember. Winston Churchill College had provided education for 800 students, mostly from the area. There were fond memories of activities like “Spring Fever Day,” with student games like tug-of-war, kite flying and raft competition. The College had changed many people's lives at an early and pivotal age. One student felt it was the turning point in his life. Another admits having had no direction before entering Winston Churchill College; he recently received an Illinois House commendation at retirement after thirty-one years of law enforcement.

At the last commencement, Bill Lower reflected, “the students had diplomas, faculty had jobs, and citizens had memories.” The community should never forget “Victories are not in the consummation, but in the quest.” Winston Churchill College had come to an honorable conclusion. As its namesake said, paraphrasing Samuel Johnson: “...courage is rightly esteemed the first of human qualities because, as has been said, it is the quality which guarantees all others.”^[21]

The short, sweet life of Winston Churchill College demonstrated many of the great man's ideals. “Blood, toil, tears and sweat” on the prairies of Illinois forged a better life for students who might otherwise have missed a priceless opportunity to prove themselves. The honor of the day was won by a hardworking community. Winston Churchill College was the proof of their fortitude.

=====

ENDNOTES

1. *Pontiac Daily Leader*, 31 July 1970.
2. *Chicago Tribune*, 25 September 1966.

3. *Pantagraph*, Bloomington, Illinois, 23 January 1966.
4. *Chicago Tribune*, 25 September 1966.
5. *Pontiac Daily Leader*, 25 August 1966.
6. *Chicago Tribune*, 26 June 1966.
7. *Chicago Tribune*, 25 September 1966.
8. *Chicago Tribune*, 26 June 1966.
9. *Pantagraph*, 23 January 1966.
10. *The Squire*, the WCC Yearbook, 1966-67.
11. WCC brochures.
12. Clementine Churchill to WCC, 6 January 1966.
13. *Chicago Tribune*, 25 September 1966.
14. *Pontiac Daily Leader*, 20 April 1966.
15. *Pontiac Daily Leader*, 3 November 1966.
16. *The Squire*, 1968-69.
17. *The Squire*, 1966-67.
18. *Pantagraph*, 1 May 1971.
19. *Pontiac Daily Leader*, 23 July 1970.
20. *Chicago Tribune*, 26 July 1971.
21. Winston S. Churchill, "Alfonso the Unlucky," *Strand Magazine*, July 1931; reprinted in *Great Contemporaries* (London: Thornton Butterworth, 1937), 137. Richard M. Langworth, ed., *Churchill By Himself* (London: Ebury Press, 2008), 14.

